

leftward tilt of the Endowment's grants and, what is worse, refused to change the panels of referees. However, the only real opposition to his appointment comes from the left, which sees Bennett's commitment to excellence and tradition as just so much "intellectual Reaganism." cc

The Reagan Administration has been widely accused of hostility to the life of the mind. Cutbacks at the National Endowments constitute, so we are

told, an attack on the arts and humanities and reflect the philistine temperament of the President's supporters, that unnatural coalition of country club Republicans and Moral Majoritarians. Maybe so. On the other hand, there is evidence that he has not gone far enough. *Item:* The Office of Private Partnerships at the National Endowment for the Arts is hiring a consultant to study the feasibility of a national health insurance for artists. We are not, it goes without saying, talking about Saul Bellow or Mikhail Bar-

yshnikov, who deserve well of the American people. No, I think we know who the beneficiaries are likely to be: the practitioners of free verse, folk dancing, and nonfunctional ceramics who make up the membership of tax-funded arts councils.

Serious artists do, on occasion, fall on hard times. Keats died of tuberculosis at an early age. If he were around today, he would probably receive better health care. On the other hand, he would either have to go unpublished or learn to write like John Ashberry. cc

CORRESPONDENCE



Letter From North Carolina

by John Shelton Reed

One morning recently, National Public Radio offered its listeners an interview with a Texas mass murderer to go with their cornflakes. This monster, who had confessed to 250 or so murders, told the reporter that some of them were "sacrifices to Satan." Aghast, the reporter asked, "You don't really believe in Satan, do you?" (He did.)

In the world according to NPR, it seems, mass murder gets more respect than religious belief, orthodox or perverse.

In actual fact, the "N" in NPR should probably stand for Northeastern (and the "P" for People's). Sure, the network drags in a lot of Californians to comment on this and that, serves up a few domesticated Southerners and other regional and ethnic specimens, and "Prairie Home Companion" is another story, but for the most part the NPR sensibility is Northeastern-yuppie secular humanism, if you'll excuse the expression.

Take this Devil business. The reporter seemed surprised that anybody, even a mass murderer, believed in the

Devil. Well, the last figures I saw on that (in an article by Clyde Z. Nunn in the Autumn 1974 issue of *Listening: Journal of Religion and Culture*) put the percentage of Southerners who were absolutely certain that Satan exists at 72 percent—up from 53 percent



nine years earlier. To be sure, only 29 percent of Northeasterners believed in Old Nick (and that figure had decreased from 33 percent in 1964), but, overall, 50 percent of all Americans believe unreservedly, and another 21 percent said it was "probably true" that Satan exists. And belief was increasing everywhere except in the Northeast.

Who's out of touch here?

Another example: When a movie reviewer on *All Things Considered* discussed a movie that hinged on whether

its two main characters—"married (in the words of the country song) but not to each other"—would or would not commit adultery, the NPR anchorwoman professed disbelief that two adults, these days, would hesitate. Well, I don't have the numbers on it, but I can testify that there are lots of folks out here in the provinces (and even some in the Northeast, if you look for them) who try, sometimes successfully, to keep the Commandments, even the seventh.

The fact is that religion is still a force to be reckoned with in American life, although you wouldn't know it to listen to NPR (or, as Benjamin Stein pointed out recently in the *Wall Street Journal*, to watch prime-time television). Leave aside the fact that it is pernicious to have "opinion leaders" so out of touch with the country that supports them—I suggest that it's dangerous. Look at what happened to the Shah. cc

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REVISIONS

The Raven of the Writing Desk

Edgar Allan Poe spent most of his life as an outsider. Orphaned at the age of two and reared by an unsympathetic stepfather, he displayed considerable talent as a student, as a soldier, and as a cadet at West Point, where lack of funds (the rich Mr. Allan was a skinflint) forced him to drop out. His literary career is the American contribution to the saga of neglected genius: a man of talent and erudition condemned to literary drudgery as an editor; a Southern gentleman compelled to live not just in poverty but in the North. As an editor Poe positively *made* at least two publications, but he found it increasingly difficult to get along with interfering employers. A weakness for drink, complicated by an inability to hold his liquor, contributed to an ill-deserved reputation for dissolution. In the end Poe did seek solace in the bottle after the death of his young wife. He died at the age of 40, and the literary jackals and *poseurs* whom he had exposed conspired to destroy his reputation. In an unforeseen way, the plan backfired as the *poète maudit* became a hero to Baudelaire and Mallarmé.

This splendid new edition (Edgar Allan Poe: *Poetry and Tales, Essays and Reviews*; Library of America; New York) will give the common reader a rare opportunity to judge Poe's contribution to American letters. For the price of a dinner for two, we have a well-bound and clearly printed collection of just about everything worth reading in the Poe corpus—almost 3,000 pages. The two volumes are sensibly edited, although the notes are not very helpful, and the state of the Greek quotations inexcusable. Still, no one with the slightest interest in American literature can afford to be without this edition.

There is no one quite like Poe in the history of American literature. He ranks first or among the first of our poets before Eliot; he had a hand in inventing not only detective fiction but science fiction as well; he is our only important critic before Henry James. Of his poetry, it can be said that most people either like it or hate it or both. It is not only that his work is uneven, but that he is at his best, sometimes, when he is at his worst—as in "Ulalume," so brilliantly parodied by Bret Harte. His

fiction has fared somewhat better among the critics. As long as there is a market for tales of suspense, horror, and detection—judging from sales I would sell the puts and buy the calls—Poe will be read and admired. But it may be Poe the critic who most deserves our respect.

Americans have always had mixed feelings about their literature. We have been capable of extravagant admiration for second-raters like Whittier or Lowell (James Russell, Amy, Robert) while continuing to turn up our noses at real American originals like the frontier humorists. It took a Henry Mencken to appreciate Mark Twain, while Faulkner and Poe himself were, to some extent, "discovered" by the French. We boast of our independence from Europe but roll over and play dead if some literary *flâneur* speaks with an accent, preferably British. Worst of all, at every period of our history we have allowed our tastes to be dictated to us by a narrow coterie of anti-American fanatics in the Northeast. This self-imposed provincialism not only stunted the growth of our literature, it almost nipped in the bud the development of a serious criticism.

Poe had one of the prime requisites of a critic—a definite (though not always impeccable) taste. His independence enabled him to praise Hawthorne as "one of the very few American storytellers whom the critic can commend with the hand upon the heart," at the same time detecting the transcendentalist poison in his imagination. Much of Poe's reviewing was squandered on fashionable rubbish. But if pricking the balloons of Seba Smith and Mrs. Sigourney did not endear Poe to the literary establishment, his balanced and judicious appreciations of Longfellow and Lowell helped even less. The fact is that, despite certain good qualities, nobody now reads either of them. Outside of school, it is doubtful that many ever did.

For all his unwillingness to hyperbolize our native literature, Poe was one of the few literary men who fully appreciated the genuine American strain in William Gilmore Simms, John Pendleton Kennedy, and Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, whose *Georgia Scenes* he described as forming "an era in our reading." Poe's praise is all the more

remarkable in that he was an urbanite with no experience of rural life, much less of the frontier. His judgment was remarkably prescient. While the line of descent from Longfellow and Lowell petered out in the Harvard intellectuals who turned away from novels and verse and found solace in scholarship and political eccentricity (at the best, one thinks of Henry and Brooks Adams, Irving Babbitt, Paul Elmer More, and the renegade T. S. Eliot), while Simms and Longstreet were the precursors of Twain, Faulkner, and of almost every noteworthy production of American literature. Why did Whittier become a schoolbook classic and Longstreet only a provincial curiosity? The answer lies in the study of geography rather than criticism. Longstreet was not a Yankee.

"The manner in which the cabal of 'The North American Review' first write all our books and then review them" was a constant theme of Poe's criticism. Although Poe was a loyal Southerner, that was not the main point—he was merciless on the weaknesses of the South's most important writer, Gilmore Simms. The problem, as he saw it, lay in the pretensions of genteel Bostonians whose birth and connections entitled them to a literary career. For them Southern literature was a contradiction in terms and New York—the home of Irving and Cooper—beyond the pale. "We like Boston," he confessed. "We were born there and perhaps it is just as well not to mention that we are heartily ashamed of the fact." Times change and the Boston literati eventually set up shop in New York. But substitute *New York Review of Books* for *North American Review*, *New York* for *Boston Times*, and Poe's observations ring as true today as they did in the 1840's. In this century most of American literature has been the product of the Midwest and South, by writers who were, in many cases, downright hostile to our mecca of arts and letters. It is always a bad sign when the poetasters and urban provincials of the Northeast have the upper hand as they did in the 1840's and do now since World War II. Until Americans become sure enough of themselves and their literature to ignore the pretensions of New York and Boston, we shall never come of age. (TJF)

cc



Magnum Magazines

A class struggle is going on in the U.S. today, a confrontation between an intellectualized elite and what used to be called the democracy. The upper classes go to good schools—Ivy League or at least Big 10—where they pick up easy answers to the meaning of “life, the universe, and everything,” while members of the democracy work their way through local branches of state college, if they’re lucky: a lot of them ended up as the expendable matériel clause in Lyndon Johnson’s foreign policy. The easiest place to size up the class war is a large magazine stand. On one rack are the *Harper’s*, *New Republic*, *Gourmet*, and *National Review*, but move down past the naked-lady covers and you run into hot rod and off-the-road mags, men’s true adventure stories, and finally, an almost endless array of weapons and survival publications with names like *New Breed* and *Combat Handguns*. The readers and editors are well aware that they belong to a strange subculture. *American Survival* complains that the antigun elite is convinced “these magazines should be removed from the newsstands, along with other ‘pornography.’” There is something

undeniably erotic about the “happiness-is-a-warm-gun” photo layouts of automatic weapons and grenade launchers, and you *do* run across gun descriptions like: “Bo Derek, it’s not” and “lovely but lethal,” and, of a small-caliber gun, it’s like “kissin’ your sister.” In fact, most of them devote the bulk of their pages to hardware. An average issue of *New Breed* or *Soldier of Fortune* discusses and advertises enough weapons to arm both sides of the civil war in El Salvador.

After you get over the pornographic shock—or thrill—of seeing so much firepower, you begin to realize that many of the military magazines exhibit a populist editorial outlook that is closer to Gen. Patton than to Conan the Barbarian. These guys see the world as quite simply a struggle between evil and good: of hoodlums against families and of communist imperialism against the aspirations of decent people to be left alone.

The most famous military magazine is *Soldier of Fortune*, “the journal of professional adventurers.” Sandwiched in between ads for rapid-fire conversion kits, armored personnel carriers, genuine gorkha knives, and posters showing an armed G. Gordon Liddy, are sensible and temperate articles on military history and foreign affairs. On an everyday level, *SOF* takes the rights of gunowners very seriously and is right now conducting a campaign to put its publisher, Robert K. Brown, on the Board of Directors of the National Rifle Association, which is, they claim, beginning to weaken in its defense of the Second Amendment. Despite its carefully maintained image as a mercenaries’ newsletter, an average issue of *SOF* provides its readers with a clearer idea of the armed side of politics than a decade’s worth of *Foreign Affairs*.

Other similar publications are much less interesting. *New Breed*, for example, seems to specialize more in actual military affairs. Closer to the edge are things like *American Survival*

Guide, which recently printed a survey of worldwide terrorist activities, concluding with this call to arms: “Prepare for the worst, Now! The ring grows tighter every day. World War III has started.”

Most magazine readers are, in fact, not very interested in events in El Salvador or Afghanistan. Their fears lie closer to home, in the war of survival going on in the streets. They want to know what kind of handgun to give the little woman when they leave town. In the old days, guns and ammo journals catered only to specialists—hunters, collectors, and target shooters—but soaring crime rates and attacks on the Second Amendment have turned many of them political.

In *Handgunner* readers can still find an interview with the Southwest Pistol League champion, and technical evaluations of pistols, ammunition, scopes, and holsters, but it also preaches political activism. An article on the Morton Grove handgun ban warns that without “active participation in politics,” handgun owners could lose their Second Amendment rights. The Morton Grove ordinance was upheld in court, “because the law *only* banned handguns.” “If the same logic were applied to the First Amendment’s freedoms of speech . . . it could be argued that a town could ban newspapers—one form of media—as long as it left radio and television stations alone!”

Civilians interested in self-defense might find *Combat Handguns* helpful. Here are articles on choosing the right handgun for home defense, performing “the Roman salute” (a tricky reverse-hand draw), finding bullets that will “pound through a car door,” and using your pistol in a “parking lot ambush.” A picture of one of the staff writers shows him wearing a T-shirt that reads: “Gun control is being able to hit your target.”

A more radical philosophy of gun ownership emerges in survivalist magazines like *Survive* or *American Survi-*

